

Ezekiel 34:1-6 and Matthew 23:1-12

“Don’t believe everything you hear”

So welcome back to First Presbyterian. We have been on a journey that began in January of 2022. Some have jumped on and off during this journey. We began then looking at the Gospel of Matthew and we gave it the label the Gospel of righteousness, because Jesus uses the word righteousness and teaches on the topic of righteousness more in Matthew than in all the other books of the Bible combined. We began this because we were coming out of Covid and it seemed like Christians were acting in ways that didn’t really look like what Jesus taught, so what did Jesus teach, and we saw that the definition of righteousness was: acting according to the will of God. Throughout these years we have been focusing on that which according to Jesus is the most important thing as a disciple of Jesus.

I have planned out my sermon series through the first week of January 2026 and we will finish this Gospel of Righteousness the Sunday before, December 28. Throughout these four years we have been learning together and been on a journey together of trying to put into practice what it means to be a disciple of Jesus which is primarily righteousness. Acting according to the will of God.

Notice I said acting and not speaking or teaching or commanding, but rather acting according to the will of God. The greatest barrier that churches face in making disciples are the people in the church. Christians who are hypocrites, those who say one thing and do another, those who say they are loving God and yet their actions portray a message that is opposite that of righteousness, that is the greatest barrier to making disciples for Jesus. Both of our Scriptures today address this in a very clear way. Let’s read.

READ

Our first reading for today we find the prophet Ezekiel speaking about shepherds who were in charge of caring for the sheep under their control. All of this is a metaphor and Ezekiel when he uses the term shepherd is actually meaning pastor or religious leader in any way shape or form. Anyone who claims to be interpreting the Word of God for the people of God is considered a pastor or a shepherd of the people. In fact, in many languages the terms pastor and shepherd are exactly the same. I know I’ve said that before, but in Italian the word pastore means both a shepherd of sheep and a pastor of a church. You have to know which one you are talking about within the context of a sentence.

There are certain expectations that you have of your pastor. While my official title is minister of the Word and Sacrament, my title reflects accurately my primary responsibilities. I will lead you as I preach from God's Word to a place that more reflects God's desires for your life. My title reflects that I will also lead you in worship through the sacraments of Baptism and Communion.

But you have other expectations of your pastor, right? You expect that I will be by your side in the hospital, that I will be there to celebrate your joys and your triumphs, that I will help create and run programs, that I will direct and manage staff. There are expectations that I will run 3 fantasy leagues and every March run a bracket.

The shepherd of the church, the pastor of the people according to Ezekiel is called to represent God not only by teaching but also by doing and by living. There is and there should be a higher standard for the shepherd because God has given the shepherd specific responsibilities that revolve around living and how to live. They are not more important standards, but just different standards than what others may have.

The shepherd of the church, the pastor of the people, according to Ezekiel, is called to represent God not only by teaching but also by living. That was not happening in Ezekiel's day. The pastors were gladly taking the sacrifices offered to them for God, but not pouring back into the life of the people. The pastors were happy to tell the people what to do, but they were not doing it themselves. As a result Ezekiel comes down pretty hard on them and told the people do not trust your pastors. Their words and their actions show that they are loyal to something other than the people, to something other than you. The pastors in Ezekiel's day were only loyal to their own self-interests.

There is a real danger when you are put in a position of power or influence or teaching, and that is that over time that position can turn itself into instead of serving the people, you are serving yourself. That is why James says in 3:1 not many of you should become teachers, because with that title comes responsibilities that can be difficult to bear for many people.

So this was true in Ezekiel's day, this was true in Jesus' day, and this is true today as well as we live in a culture where many would pride themselves for being a part of what is referred to as a Christian environment. But what we see happening around us is no longer a consistent message that following Jesus means acting according to the will of God. But rather a large sector of the church in our country has been taken over by agendas that the those on the right and

those on the left have become spokespeople not for Jesus, but for their own causes, their own agendas, and their own cultural wars and norms that they want to follow. And call it Christian, it is not.

This is nothing new. It seems new to us, it seems intense and severe to us, but this is exactly what Ezekiel calls out, what Jesus calls out in Matthew, and so it deserves to be called out today as well. Let's look at Jesus' interactions with those religious leaders who would take their own agenda and make it the most important thing that the church could stand for, as opposed to living and acting according to the will of God.

We begin a new chapter today in Matthew, and it starts a section of the Bible that takes a lot of time in castigating and Jesus saying some really harsh words against the religious leaders, the pastors, the shepherds of his day. Next week we will look at a whole series of Woes, like WOE where Jesus warns the religious leaders that their actions will have consequences. Michael Wilson will start us off. I emailed him this week and I said do you want to start this whole Woe section, the people like you and I don't want to hurt that. He said: bring it on!

You see, it is easy as a pastor to identify an enemy and pursue it and call out those things that are wrong and those people who are acting in a wrong way. But Scripture teaches us repeatedly that before we are to turn our attention to what other people are doing wrong, in identifying enemies, we have to first identify the ways in which we fall short. Beware of anyone who is not able to say that they have made a mistake, apologize, and then learn from that. That is not hypocrisy, when you admit that you were wrong and that you made a mistake. Hypocrisy finds itself nestled in the midst of those who demand and require certain things from certain people and then refuse to apply that same standard to their own life.

It is much harder to identify a neighbor and be a servant to them, than to identify an enemy and pursue them. Anyone can do that. But righteousness is not about pursuing enemies, it is about loving and being a servant to your neighbor. The warning Jesus gives to us today is based on a Narcissism that comes from being a shepherd, or a pastor, or a religious leader, or someone, really anyone, that is given attention and told that they are important.

Jesus says don't call anyone rabbi, or father, or teacher. Rabbi in Hebrew literally meant "great one." I wouldn't mind that title? But that's the problem, isn't it? Who wouldn't want to go around with people calling them the Great One? Now, let's be clear, it is not a mortal sin for clergy to be addressed as Reverend, or Father, or Doctor, or Pastor. But if that title serves as a

barrier between the clergy and the laity, that needs to be broken down and it is unhealthy. It was unhealthy in Jesus' day. They liked to be called shepherd of the people but they used that title as an excuse for them not to have to live up to the standard, the even higher standard that comes with that title. You can't have the title if you don't live out the testimony.

Any attempt to make yourself better or more important than anyone else is a sin. The Pharisees in Jesus' day imposed burdens on their members by requiring them to do certain things that they didn't do themselves. Every year we have a sermon on giving and I preach that God calls us to give 10% to the church. How would my message come across if I said that this is what is expected of you, and I didn't do it myself? I've told you stories of what has happened in our lives because of how faithful God has been to us in that area of our lives, and yet still some do not give 10%. Some do not want to live in and experience the fullness of God's blessings.

The Pharisees would preach about giving but not give themselves. That is imposing a burden, they would wear insignias and identify themselves as religious leaders by what they wore, so that they could be noticed. I bought a collar the other day, you know, a religious collar. We are going to start getting involved pretty directly in actions related to welcoming the stranger as Jesus commands in Matthew 25, and apparently wearing a collar, identifying yourself as a religious person is supposed to help. We'll see. The Pharisees claimed certain privileges that were only for them, and they constantly sought out public honor. All of these things are not time specific, they cut across the centuries, and religious leaders in time immemorial continue to seek after these things. Beware of them, or of us who seek out these things.

Today Jesus simply tells his disciples, your righteousness has to be better than what you see in the Pharisees. I say to you today, our righteousness has to be better than what we are seeing in churches that take sides with political parties that claim a Christianity that is not reflected in Scripture. The progressive churches are doing it and the conservative churches are doing it. Look at the last two verses here. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and that is that we are willing to be a servant of all and not raise ourselves ever above anyone else or try to make ourselves better than anyone else.

With this title of Christian comes the standard of humility that is non-negotiable. There is never a time that we are called to put ourselves before others. The immediate underlying message here is the humility of the disciple. If there is a message that is based on us vs. them

and that we are better or have the higher ground, it is more likely than not that this message is not based on righteousness and is words alone. Jesus tells us today in vs. 12. Amen.